

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KENDALL HALL  
SCHOOL

by George Kendall

From: George Kendall

For: The Peterborough Historical Society

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A Brief History of the Kendall Hall School

Among the dislocations caused by the outbreak of war in 1914 was the abrupt change in the plans my father, Charles Pierce Kendall, had been making to purchase a small boys' school in Maine. A high school principal ( at North Easton, Mass.), then principal of a semi-private school, the Wheeler School at North Stonington, Connecticut, Father believed he had an interesting future in private school work.

When the Maine plans fell through, he resolved to return to Harvard for a graduate degree in education. In the course of that year, he learned that the trustees of Howard Seminary, West Bridgewater, Mass., were eager to rent the then vacant buildings of their school. An agreement was reached and in 1915, My father found himself much to his surprise the independent head of a school for girls. My shy Mother, having no college degreee, felt somewhat intimidated by their new responsibilities, but the school prospered.

By 1922, Father felt that he had outgrown the necessity of renting a somewhat shabby property for his school and purchased a new property at Prides Crossing, Beverly, Massachusetts. The buildings of what had been the Frederic Sears estate (now owned by Endicott Junior College) were handsome and adaptable. The grounds were superbly planted; the ocean view was breathtaking;- and so was the mortgage.

Through the prosperous 20's and deep into the Depression years, the school continued to do well. Every year, Father met his colossal mortgage payments and in addition paid for the education of four children without ever asking for scholarships. Then the anticipated blows of the Depression hit. Enrolments, normally in the 50-60 range, fell to the 30's, then the 20's. Mortgage payments became difficult, then impossible to make.

Meantime, my own career had also felt the Depression. After graduating from college, I had dreamed for a while of going to the Harvard Business School; but with a brother already in Medical School, that was out of the question.

Business interested me, and I sought and received a passable business education at the Public Libraries of Boston and New York and by working for two years with the Childs Restaurant chain and at Macy's. Meanwhile, as the Depression caught up with them, it caught up with me; and I was fortunate to have a family enterprise, my father's school to turn to. In Boston and New York, I had made a point of living with French speaking families; so when in midyear 1932 a vacancy for a French teacher occurred at the Kendall Hall School, I was lucky enough to be ready to fill it.

As the Depression bore down on the school, my business training, however imperfect, made a difference, but it was by no means enough to enable the school to cope with its financial problems. On a winter day in 1935, my father and I were visited by two men at the Prides Crossing school.

One introduced himself as a lawyer representing the Insurance company that held the mortgage. The other was a sheriff. "Our presence here," the lawyer explained, "means that you no longer own this property."

Father was dazed, but he lost no time in communicating the bad news to two friends who offered help. The school could finish the year and close in June, it was argued. Or it could find some new property and take a chance that the worst of the Depression was over. The latter alternative was decided on. Estates were available all over New England for pennies on the dollar and with \$5000 still in the bank, Father had a small amount of bargaining power.

In April of 1935, the school, now a corporation (non-profit), not Father's personal property, was closed for Easter vacation in Prides Crossing and reopened three weeks later at the beautiful 200-acre East Hill estate of Mrs. William Schofield. The school enrolment was about 20. It now had a board of directors to whom we were answerable. Because of Father's financial troubles, responsibility for money matters was transferred to my hands. With this, administrative responsibilities soon followed.

But, even with my father and mother in the background, it was not very practical for a girls' school to have a bachelor as its head.. Fortunately, I was able to present the problem to a discriminating woman in New York who had a placement service. Through her I met in the summer of 1937 Kate Duncan Smith, a Birmingham newspaper woman, radio

commentator and teacher of English in a small local college, who, being of venturesome spirit, I persuaded to become what was in effect principal of a tiny girl's boarding school in New Hampshire. Twenty months later we were married in the chapel of the St. Marks School with my brother, Lee, and his wife, Priscilla, the only others present, besides the minister.

The school prospered modestly for a dozen years with an enrolment that fluctuated from a low of 36 to a high of 54. The students, ranging in age through the 'teens, came largely from the eastern seaboard states with a few from the west and from Colombia, S.A. In its best years, the School was a happy and effective educational institution which, in the words of the Sargent Handbook of Private Schools, "enjoyed the enthusiastic confidence of its patrons." Preparatory students entered most of the eastern colleges.

Then, in the late 40's, the climate for boarding schools began an inexorable and destructive change as the national shortage of births during the 30's and 40's was reflected in falling secondary school populations. For several years we tried to cope with the trend; then, in the spring vacation of 1949, in the "parlor" of a New York hotel where we had been interviewing prospective patrons and their daughters, Kate asked "How long can we afford to go on like this?" We were in our late 40's. We had given the school the very best we had to give, working extravagant hours 52 weeks a year for a pittance, a fraction of what we paid our teachers; and the years ahead looked black.



We therefore resigned and the trustees, seeing no possibility of finding adequate replacements willing to accept the salaries we had taken, closed the school; and, with all obligations met, distributed its assets to charity.

The last commencement was difficult. Kate and I had an important secret we could not then share with people who had trusted us. More poignantly, there were among the younger girls several sisters of alumnae; and they were outstanding. One father expressed the feeling among their parents. "You could not possibly have felt worse at sending notice of the school's closing than we in this household were to receive it."

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2-1-83

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